

# The Critical Reflection Process

## A Tool for Learning and Collegiality

The Critical Reflection Process is a process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning experiences within the context of ministry. Interim ministry often places interim pastoral leaders in a different *place* than other neighboring pastors and ministers serving in regular parish calls. In the context of interim ministry which many pastors across our three Teas-Louisiana synods find themselves called to, a Critical Reflection practice, entered into with other similarly serving interims, can provide both learning resource as well as a mechanism of support.

### Introduction

The Critical Reflection Process encourages the use of a reflective discipline as a way to rethink leadership, while simultaneously developing collegial relationships. The process is grounded in *cooperative learning*, an attitude often contrary to patterns existing in most work environments. Reflective learning also addresses a situation in which many interim ministers find themselves – trained to work as independent leaders; represented as knowing all that is needed to know; yet feeling isolated and minimally supported in this specialized ministry.

In the context of the group, *critical* is intended to mean *important* or *key* or *necessary*. Those who have used this process have found that many leaders are clumsy at being critical. They have also discovered that many leaders are trained to talk around and avoid difficult issues, not to carefully confront them. The Critical Reflection Process provides an opportunity to both solicit and provide feedback in a manner that promotes reflective learning.

### Process Overview

The Critical Reflection Process is an experience designed to help all who participate reflect on a specific ministry event in such a way that the maximum learning can take place in a short period of time and in a supportive, collegial atmosphere. The focus is on (1) What did you learn? (2) What more would you like to learn? and (3) How will you integrate these learnings into your future ministry practice?

When the process is practiced, there are three occasions for reflection using the Critical Reflection protocol: (1) peer observations and analysis; (2) the critique of the minister's actions; and (3) what learning has been gained from our reflection. Each activity in the Critical Reflection Process contains elements of careful description, thoughtful listening, questioning feedback, and then discovery as a result of reflection. The feedback arrived at through group discussions may be categorized as: *Warm* - supportive feedback, containing appreciative statements about the situation presented; *Cool* - more distanced feedback offering different ways to think about the situation presented and/or raise questions; and *Hard* - feedback that challenges and extends the presenter's thinking and/or raises concerns.

The process utilizes time limits and agreed-upon purpose and norms which help reduce interruptions in discussion and the *rush-to-comment* reaction that our busy lives seem to promote. The basic format for collegial dialogue is the same for each protocol: facilitator overview; presentation of observations, work or issue; clarification questions; feedback/discussion by discussants (participants); presenter reflection; debriefing of process. The situations and issues that presenters offer are usually rooted in feelings of concern taken from moments of their ministry that are without closure, and from issues they have not been able to find a solution for by themselves.

## The Process

There are three roles in the Critical Reflection Process: facilitator, presenter, and peers. The group may vary in size from four to seven people.

### Group Member Roles

#### **Facilitator:**

Reviews the process at the outset, even if everyone is familiar with it. Sets time limits and keeps time carefully. Participates in discussions but is on the lookout for others who want to get in conversations. Adjusts time slightly depending on participation. May end one part early or extend another, but is aware of the need to keep on time. Reminds peers of roles, warm, cool, and hard feedback, and keeping on the topic that the presenter designated. Leads *Integration* phase by adding significant observations about learning, theological implications, and integrated learning that may have been missed by the group. Is careful during *Integration* not to slip back into discussion.

#### **Presenter:**

Prepares and presents a written experience/ issue for consultancy and brings copies for each member of the group. Is clear about the specific questions that should be addressed. Unlike most discussions of this nature, the presenter does not participate in the group discussion. Sits outside the group and does not maintain eye contact during the discussion but rather takes notes and gauges what is helpful and what is not. Later, is specific about the feedback that was helpful.

#### **Peers:**

Address the experience/issue brought by the presenter and give feedback that is warm (positive), cool (critical), and hard (challenging). The feedback should be given in a supportive tone and should provide practical suggestions. Focus on the needs of the presenter. All are participants in a sacred trust and should treat it with respect.

### The Consultancy Process

The process works best in smaller groups of four to seven people where colleagues can be comfortable sharing complex issues. The presenter shares an issue, and then peers offer feedback, talking to each other, not the person who presented the issue. The presenter sits *out of* the group, listening, taking notes, and deciding what has been useful.

Each participant will be part of a one hour (60 minute) conversation. The framework below can guide your time together:

1. **The Incident or Experience** (10 minutes):

The presenter states what they wish to learn from sharing an incident/ experience with the group. Then the presenter reads the entire text of an experience write up to the group, without interruption. The experience write up should contain the background, a description of the incident, an analysis, any theological reflections, self evaluation of how the presenter thinks they handled the incident and be no more than one page in length. (See the Sample Critical Incident Report for format.) The focus of this time is on providing the information needed to understand the experience/incident.

2. **Observations** (10 minutes):

While the presenter listens, the peers reflect together on the experience/incident, with focus on additional theological, sociological, psychological, cultural, and systematic factors that they observed from the perspectives of their own experiences and that of the presenter.

3. **Learning** (10 minutes):

The presenter shares with the group what was learned during the peers' observation discussion. The presenter should share what they found out about themselves, the ministry situation, the people, the culture, and the system.

4. **Theological Implications** (15 minutes):

The presenter and the discussants dialogue with each other about theological and Biblical implications within this incident/experience. What theological/Biblical perspectives influenced the presenter during the incident? Are there other Biblical/theological perspectives to be taken into consideration? How was the Good News shared in this experience/incident?

5. **Integration** (15 minutes):

Using *I* language and reflecting together, the presenter and the entire group (facilitator, presenter, and peers) share how well the process was adhered to, and what has been learned in the past 45 minutes. How will *I*, the presenter and the group, apply what *I* have learned in this Critical Reflection in the future practice of ministry.

## Sample Critical Incident

**The Background:** Having just accepted an interim assignment, I was surprised to receive a phone call from the part-time associate pastor in the church I was about to serve asking for my advice. She was having a problem with Ralph, another pastor who regularly attends the church. I was to learn later that Ralph had also interviewed for the position as interim pastor.

**Description of Critical Incident:** During the phone conversation the associate pastor told me that Ralph had significantly altered the Sunday worship service he had been invited to lead and that he had invited guest musicians without consulting the church's organist. I encouraged her to take her concern to the congregation council if she was unable to resolve it herself. When the associate spoke to the council, she apparently did not make a convincing case. Shortly after I arrived it became clear that the associate was upset with me. She insisted that I had told her she must take the issue to the council or I would do so when I arrived. The incident continued to be a problem between us the remainder of her tenure. The level of tension in the office was painful for both of us, as well as for the secretary. The associate resigned her position nine months after my arrival, citing family concerns.

**The Analysis:** Significant issues included: becoming triangled with the associate minister and the council, failure to communicate clearly with the associate, getting involved in decisions prior to beginning my tenure, and marital problems in the associate's family. In an effort to build trust and resolve our differences, I met with the associate on several occasions. I consulted the chairperson of the interim search committee and the bishop's assistant of the synod. I also attended a counseling session with the associate minister.

The system responded by labeling as "identified patient" or "symptom bearer": the associate minister, the other minister, and me. I believe my effort to differentiate myself during the phone conversation was misinterpreted by the associate. I am convinced that the situation was compounded by the stress in associate's marriage and a prior negative history with Ralph. Too eager to assume leadership, I was afraid I would be blamed if the problem was not resolved. My leadership style of hitting the ground "running" was inappropriate as I did not have an adequate grasp of the existing interpersonal dynamics or the rules of the system.

**Theological Reflection:** One theological issue is how we deal with conflict in the church. A second issue is related to forgiveness and building trust following conflict. I failed to act on my belief that God is the center of my life and that I do not have to have all the answers.

**Evaluation:** I might simply have told the associate minister that I trusted her to deal with the situation. I was not in a position to make an informed decision. I needed to move more slowly as I entered a new system so I could better anticipate how the system would react in order to maintain homeostasis. As a child I was known as impulsive and proceeded without adequately "testing the water." Sometimes that behavior would bring applause and sometimes blame. This was a very stressful time for me. I was clearly unaware of the level of anxiety experienced by the associate minister which was often expressed by her withdrawal. I took care of myself during this time by getting regular exercise, by taking time off to recharge and relax, and by building a support system. My support group provides a reality check about my occasional need to over function.